

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal discourages footnotes and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words.

The First Professor of English

To the Editor:

May I provide a point of information about misleading implications that might arise from Franklin E. Court's article (103 [1988]: 796–807) and the response to it (104 [1989]: 221–22)? “The first professor of English” was by no means Thomas Dale at University College, London. Preceding him by three-quarters of a century was one Ebenezer Kinnersley, who held the title Professor of English beginning in 1753, at the academy that would become the University of Pennsylvania.

Anyone familiar with historical plaques in Philadelphia today will be unsurprised to learn that English as an academic discipline, like so much else, was founded by Benjamin Franklin. Unimpressed by theology as a focus for higher education and by the value of classical languages therefor, Franklin insisted that the charter of Pennsylvania Academy include a stipulation that English literature be taught.

Thirty-eight years later, though, Franklin's next-to-last letter before his death scolds the trustees for blatant attempts to subvert the founders' vision of English education. The trustees, in glorifying classical literature and denigrating English, had been using administrative tactics familiar today: financial disincentives, inequitable work loads, sexism, and punishment for good teaching.

At the Pennsylvania Academy in 1751, the Greek and Latin teacher held the title Rector. As assistant he had a tutor for every twenty students. He earned £200. The English teacher earned £150 and had a tutor for every forty students. His title was Master of the English School. His name was David Dove. He was young. He was dynamic. He performed English literature for his classes—today his practices would be termed oral interp or readers' theater—and he taught them oral performance. Dramatic readings by his students were enthusiastically attended by parents and the general public. Dove attracted ninety students, an enormous number at that time. Still bursting with energy, he began using evenings and weekends to teach literary performance to classes of girls.

The trustees intervened. David Dove was fired in 1753. In his place the trustees hired Ebenezer Kinnersley, an aging man with personality to match his name and no demonstrable interest in literature in any language. Parents complained at the cessation of public readings. Enrollment in English courses plummeted. While Ben

Franklin was out of the country in 1769, the trustees voted to discontinue English, but they were stymied by the charter. Instead Ebenezer Kinnersley continued to plod around and around the post, which was retitled Professor of English in 1753, until his death twenty long years later. English has regularly been taught at Penn since then, albeit sometimes offhandedly by the professor of Latin or the professor of history.

This letter does not call for a reply from Court, as he nowhere states that Thomas Dale was the first English professor anywhere. I just wanted to set the record straight, and also hint that the recent upsurge of interest in performance analysis has roots in the history of the discipline.

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Ibsen's Nora

To the Editor:

Ibsen's Nora can do without Joan Templeton's defense (“*The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen*,” 104 [1989]: 28–40). Besides being lovable, Nora is selfish, frivolous, seductive, unprincipled, and deceitful. These qualities make her the remarkable dramatic character she is, and demonstrate Ibsen's capacity to turn polemic into play.

The important point about Ibsen the artist is that Nora lacked her deepening dimensions in the first draft. She started out a sweet, martyred wife oppressed by a selfish husband, to suit Ibsen's thesis: “There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one in woman. . . . A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day. . . . A mother in modern society is as useless, after she bears children, as insects who go away and die.”

So Ibsen began with a maltreated, stuffed Nora doll, deceptive only to conceal her noble act of saving her husband. Then suddenly, in the act of creation, Nora forced a character on the playwright—when Torvald asked her, midway, about the scratches she had made on the mailbox as she tried to steal the letter “exposing” her. How did Nora absolve herself? By blaming the scratches on her thieving children! Talk about principle! But do any great dramatic characters stick unwaveringly to principle? Ib-

sen may well have thanked the gods for inspiring him with Nora's frailties.

Hence his final draft: a new Nora, emerging with all the humanizing faults that make her so exciting. She becomes a complex of cunning and naïveté. She now munches on macaroons forbidden by Torvald; when he suspects them, she lies: she would never go against him. When he discovers the sweets, she lies: her friend brought them. That she borrowed money to save Torvald she will only tell Kristine—now; she is saving the secret for when she is old and no longer pretty and will need something to hold Torvald. She doesn't care what happens to the people she borrowed from—they were only strangers. To get Kristine a job in Torvald's bank, she lies about how Kristine learned of the position. She boasts to Krogstad about her influence over her husband—then takes back the lie when challenged. To get money from Dr. Rank, she erotically flicks a pair of stockings at him—then blames him for the confession of love she provokes. To get rid of him, she lies about needing to go get her dress; then, when he sees it in her room, she fabricates "another" one. By the time she decoys Torvald from the letterbox, Ibsen has caught up with the Nora of the first draft, who blames her children for what she has done.

Ibsen similarly deepened all the other roles, and enriched his imagery, to fit the charming, exciting, dangerous character he made out of Nora. Then, having done that, he threw her away, locked in by his original conception. Instead of a valuable moment of self-awareness for this layered creature he developed, Ibsen only allowed her self-blindness, without irony. She blames her father and her husband for making her a simple doll when in fact Ibsen's final draft has made her a shrewd, subtle, manipulative woman. She might better have blamed her men for *that*.

Now Nora could easily reform the husband she has so well managed; indeed the bewildered man offers most earnestly to change in any way to suit her. Nora might have been honest and open with him for a change. She could declare a partnership with him, as Dickens's Bella, in *Our Mutual Friend*, had done years earlier: "I want to be so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house." Or oppositely, Nora could even defeat him on his own grounds, like the clever wife in Strindberg's *The Father*, by arranging to have her husband carted off to an asylum.

Her "woman's conscience" might move her to stay and defend her children or to take them away with her. Torvald begs her to think of them. Instead, Nora slams that door and runs away, leaving her beloved children in the hands of a monster, to be distorted as she says she has been. If one imagines the children, awakened by that slamming door, coming in to face their father across the room, one sees that the male-oppressive cycle must begin all over again if there is no heroic woman in the house to resist it. Deserted Little Ivar and Bob will be clones of Torvald, little Emmy doomed to repeat her mother's sad story.

Perhaps the real feminist point of the play is that when

Nora deserted her house she was only demonstrating a final time how the male society had corrupted her values. But Ibsen did not have the perspective to see that. He seemed trapped by his preparatory note: "A mother in modern society is as useless, after she bears her children, as insects who go away and die." Presumably only by going away and "finding herself" could Nora, in Ibsen's view, realize her "woman's conscience" and be useful. Ibsen sends her out into the world without a smidgen of social or artistic purpose or a vision of service for anyone except herself. We may have a touch of compassion for the society that has clever, cunning, lovable Nora thrust on it. By exercising his playwright's genius and giving her flaws, Ibsen did better than he knew.

MARVIN ROSENBERG

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Reply:

Ignoring my essay entirely, Marvin Rosenberg has seen fit to send to the editor of *PMLA* a précis of his "Ibsen versus Ibsen, Or: Two Versions of *A Doll House*," *Modern Drama* 12 (1969): 187–96. I list Rosenberg's article in my Works Cited and place it, in note 4, in the tradition I am tracing, calling it "a re-hash of [Else] Høst's points, although Rosenberg seems unacquainted with her well-known essay ["Nora," *Edda* 46 (1946): 13–48]." I am now happy to expand on Rosenberg's place in the backlash.

"Ibsen versus Ibsen" is a late version of the outworn theory of "the two Noras," which originated in 1879 in the columns of the play's first outraged reviewers; the old argument, which constituted the first backlash against Ibsen's play, claims that Nora does not have to be taken seriously, because the frivolous doll of acts 1 and 2 could never have become the serious woman of act 3. Although the notion of the "two Noras" occasionally crops up in middlebrow drama reviews (e.g., those of the *New York Times* for the Lincoln Center revival of 1975), it has been largely discredited by critics, directors, and actresses. Halvdan Koht, Harold Clurman, and Liv Ullmann, among others, have dismissed the notion of the split heroine as a serious injustice to Ibsen's integral text, which lays the foundation for Nora's exit by dramatizing the woman hidden in the role-playing doll.

Rosenberg's peculiar contribution to the discredited critical tradition of "the two Noras" is the charge that Ibsen lacked control over his material because he was unable to shake off the pernicious feminist influence of his own working notes and draft. But Rosenberg's account of Ibsen's draft is erroneous; his claim that the early Nora is merely a victim, a "sweet, trusting, martyred wife oppressed by a selfish husband," is false. Nora is just as full of "character," just as resentful of being patronized, in the draft as she is in the final version; the flashes of defiance in the draft scenes with Mrs. Linde and Krogstad—"I was the one who got the money" and "I was the one